

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal: Bridge at Lock 68

HAER No. MD-70

Spanning the C & O Canal and towpath beside Lock 68,

164.82 miles from the eastern terminus of the C & O Canal National Park

Oldtown Vicinity

Allegany County

Maryland

HAER
MD,
1-OLD70.V,
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO CANAL: BRIDGE AT LOCK 68

HAER No. MD-70

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MD,
1-OLDTOWN,
11-

Location: Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park near Lock #68 spanning the canal and the towpath, 164.82 miles from the eastern terminus. Oldtown vicinity, Allegany County, Maryland.

UTM: 18/707340/4378200
Quad: Oldtown, Maryland

Dates of Construction: 1910; abutments: 1850

Builder: Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company

Present Owner: National Capital Park Region
National Park Service

Present Use: Not in use. Maintained as an historic resource of the park region.

Significance: Similar in purpose to other bridges along the canal, this bridge carried traffic over the canal to farmlands and to a ferry on the Potomac River which crossed from Maryland to West Virginia and a Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Depot. The bridge was important to trade in the area. The abandonment of this bridge can be linked to the changes in America's commercial activities and transportation routes in the first half of the twentieth century. The structure's Warren metal truss exemplifies a prevalent bridge form for American bridges from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

Historian: Mary Kendall Shipe, 1988.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal dates from 1825 when it was chartered to provide a commercial connection between the eastern market and the trans-Allegheny West by means of the Chesapeake Bay and Ohio River via the Potomac River. The oldest portion of the canal (the eastern portion) operated from 1831 to 1924. The U.S. Government acquired the canal in 1938, and it was given National Register status by the 1970s.¹

The building of the canal on the right-of-way land purchased by the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company included many major challenges, including the blocking of lands and commercial ferry crossings at many points along the Potomac River. The need for vehicular crossings above and below the canal became evident in the plan for the canal. Culverts underneath the canal often sufficed for passage, but bridges above the canal provided another solution. At times, culverts would fill up with debris from run-off, barring passage. For this reason, bridges proved more economical particularly when located at the more important river crossings that carried greater traffic loads. Bridges also accommodated larger vehicles carrying cargo and goods as a bridge height had fewer restrictions than the height of a culvert. Another purpose of a bridges across the canal was often to facilitate travel for those who owned land between the river and the canal that was under cultivation or used for grazing.

The bridge site at Lock 68 demonstrates the need that was created by canal construction for vehicular structures at points along the canal in that it facilitated both agricultural and commercial pursuits on the riverfront. A ferry at this location crossed the river to West Virginia and the B & O South Branch Depot, making this location an important crossing.² Lowlands between the river and the canal that were farmed also required access. Landowners were greatly inconvenienced by the destruction of the bridge during the Civil War further illustrating the necessity of a bridge at this location.

The Bridge at Lock 68 stands as the final replacement of the two earlier wood pivot bridges at this site. The first wood pivot bridge was constructed by 1850 at a cost of \$1,000.³ The bridge was open to traffic in time for the "Fifty-Mile Section" opening of the canal in October, 1850. In 1865, Confederate soldiers destroyed this wood pivot bridge during the Civil War. As part of a movement to "wreak havoc on the canal"⁴, Imboden, a Confederate officer, sent men across the Potomac River to burn the bridge over Lock 68 and

¹ For further information on C&O Canal history, see Walter Sanderlin, The Great National Project (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1946).

² Edwin Bearss, The Bridges of the C & O Canal (Denver Service Center: National Park Service, January, 1968), p. 135.

³ Bearss, p. 2.

⁴ Bearss, p. 132.

boats in the lock. After the Civil War, citizens in the area demanded that the wood pivot bridge be replaced. The replacement cost was \$1,000. This bridge was in use until it began to deteriorate in 1910 at which time it was replaced by the extant bridge.

The present bridge is uniquely comprised of two sections: a modified Warren truss linked with a beam span of smaller length. The structure is eighty-four feet seven inches in length and twelve feet in width. The Warren truss, a single span pony truss, fifty-four feet and six inches in length, has diagonals that work in compression and tension and verticals that form a bracing system for the triangular web of the truss. The truss height is approximately five feet. Riveted connections, typically used on Warren truss systems, give the structure greater rigidity. The particular connectors on the structure suggest that it was prefabricated and assembled on site.⁵ The beam span, simple in design, is approximately thirty feet in length. Stone abutments support the structure; the square abutment on the towpath side has an approximate height of eight feet and also supports the road approach that leads to farmlands along the river. The other abutment, eighteen feet high, is comprised of live rock (rock already present at the site). The abutments of this structure are considered to be "inconsistent with the majority of the masonry work in the canal"⁶ in that their composition is coursed field stone and rough rubble. Railings run the length of the bridge. The wood deck remains intact but is deteriorating. This structure is presently not in use but is minimally maintained as an historic resource of the C & O Canal National Historical Park.

⁵ Thomas E. Fields, Historic Structure Report: Iron Bridge at Lock #68 (Denver Service Center: National Park Service, October, 1976), p. 4.

⁶ Fields, p. 4.

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